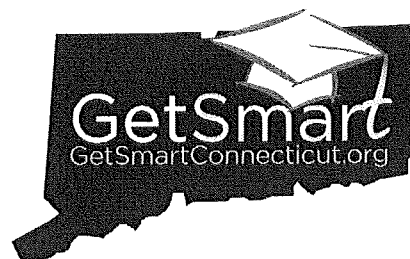


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A candid conversation about last-in, first-out layoffs

There's been a lot of talk lately about teacher layoffs in Connecticut – in fact, there could be thousands this year. And unless our elected officials take immediate action, the primary factor that will determine the vast majority of those layoffs is teacher seniority.

ConnCAN believes that Connecticut can and must do better. But some people have expressed skepticism about moving away from a seniority-based approach to layoffs. We wanted to take the opportunity to address those concerns and make the case for enacting a smarter layoff policy this year.

What we're hearing: Teachers have worked hard to attain seniority, and our primary concern when it comes to layoffs should be preserving the effort and commitment of those who have been there the longest.

Ofentimes when we hear about teacher layoffs, the only discussion is about their impact on adults: that this is only about whether or not a teacher will keep his job. From this perspective, it might make sense to use seniority because it protects those who have dedicated the longest amount of time to the profession. The problem with this premise is that it assumes that kids aren't affected by teacher layoffs beyond the raw numbers of teachers let go, and that there is no meaningful or measurable relationship between a teacher and her students' learning.

But we know this is not the case. Teachers are the most important factor in a student's success in school, and teacher performance varies greatly – without regard to where a teacher falls on the seniority spectrum. Studies show that a teacher's influence on student achievement is up to 20 times greater than any other variable, including class size or poverty.¹ In fact, four consecutive years with an effective teacher can erase the racial black-white testing gap.² Meanwhile, consecutive years with an ineffective teacher can produce a devastating setback for students' achievement.³

¹ Daniel Fallon. "Case Study of a Paradigm Shift: The Value of Focusing on Instruction." Carnegie Corporation of New York, Education Division. <http://research.mathmeister.com/Documents/FallonTeacherEffect.rtf>

² Douglas O. Staiger, Robert Gordon, and Thomas J. Kaine. "Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job." Brookings Institution. April 2006. http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2006/04education_gordon.aspx

³ Karen L. Bembry, Heather R. Jordan, Elvia Gomez, Mark C. Anderson, and Robert L. Mendro. "Policy Implications of Long-Term Teacher Effects on Student Achievement." Dallas Public Schools. 1998. <http://www.dallasisd.org/eval/research/articles/Bembry-Policy-Implications-of-Long-Term-Teacher-Effects-on-Student-Achievement-1998.pdf>

There is a connection between a teacher's contributions and the learning outcomes for his students, and the basis of that connection is not seniority. Seniority is simply not a good proxy for teacher performance, and we must acknowledge that students suffer when we treat all teachers as if they are equally likely to deliver great results for kids. Research shows that seniority-based layoffs can set back student learning by as much as three months, compared to layoffs driven by teacher effectiveness;⁴ we've got to figure out a better way this year, before the worst of the layoffs come to pass.

What we're hearing: A more senior teacher will always be a better teacher, so this is what's good for students.

Our intuition might tell us that a more senior teacher will always be a better teacher, but that intuition just doesn't check out. Robust, peer-reviewed research has consistently shown that teachers with three years of experience can be just as effective as long-tenured teachers.^{5,6,7} Teachers themselves also don't believe that seniority is any guarantee of teacher effectiveness: in a report on 12 districts in four states, 43 percent of teachers said they have a tenured coworker performing badly enough to warrant dismissal.⁸ Not only that, the variation in teacher performance is extreme: we know that there are incredible teachers who have been teaching for three years and for 30 years, and we know that the same goes for teachers who just shouldn't be there.

What we're hearing: Right now, seniority is the only objective information we have to distinguish among teachers, so we have to keep using it, at least for now.

As stated above, seniority is not an effective method for distinguishing among teachers in terms of their effectiveness in the classroom; all it tells us is how long someone has been teaching, not how good a teacher he is. It is true, however, that with a few exceptions such as New Haven, Connecticut's school districts do not have robust evaluation systems that define effectiveness. Legislation enacted last year requires all districts to develop a teacher evaluation system that is connected to student achievement growth by 2013, but in the absence of such a system, there are several other factors we could incorporate into decisions made this spring. For example:

Specialized training: We should be able to account for training that teachers have undertaken that is not reflected in their certification status. For example, if a teacher has undergone a year of training in the Montessori method to work at a public Montessori school, it doesn't make sense to

⁴ Dan Goldhaber and Roddy Theobald. "Managing the Teacher Workforce in Austere Times: The Implications of Teacher Layoffs." CEDAR Working Paper. <http://www.cedr.us/papers/working/CEDR%20WP%202010-7%20Teacher%20Layoffs%2012-22-10.pdf>

⁵ Douglas N. Harris and Tim R. Sass. "Teacher Training, Teacher Quality, and Student Achievement." CALDER Working Paper. March 2007. http://www.caldercenter.org/pdf/1001059_teacher_training.pdf

⁶ Steven Rivkin, Eric Hanushek, and John F. Kain. "Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement." *Econometrica*. 73(2): 417-458. <http://www.econ.ucsb.edu/~jon/Econ230C/HanushekRivkin.pdf>

⁷ Eric Hanushek and Steven Rivkin. "How to Improve the Supply of High Quality Teachers." *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*. May 2003. <http://edpro.stanford.edu/Hanushek/admin/pages/files/uploads/Teacher%20quality.Brookings.pdf>

⁸ "The Widget Effect." The New Teacher Project. 2009. <http://widgeteffect.org/downloads/TheWidgetEffect.pdf>

let that teacher be bumped out of her job by a teacher who has been in the system longer, but who doesn't have the requisite training in order to be effective in that school or position.

Chronic absenteeism: If a teacher has a track record of absences without documented good cause, he should not have the privilege of retaining his position simply because he attained tenure before another teacher.

Incompetence: Most districts use an inadequate system to rate teachers;⁹ for example, in Hartford and most other districts, less than one percent of teachers are rated "unsatisfactory."¹⁰ When it comes to layoffs, couldn't we start with the few teachers who are consistently rated this poorly?

Extraordinary Merit: Even though most districts don't yet have teacher evaluation systems that consistently distinguish among teachers on the basis of their classroom effectiveness, many do recognize extraordinary teachers through "teacher of the year" awards.^{11,12} Recent winners of such recognition should be exempted from layoffs, no matter what their seniority.

It's a cop-out to say that without an evaluation system, seniority is the only viable or objective way to make layoff decisions.

What we're hearing: Districts will do anything to save money, so changing the layoff policy will result in the arbitrary dismissal of highly paid veteran teachers.

Let's be clear: an approach that targets any kind of teacher, new or veteran, without regard for their actual effectiveness is fundamentally unfair to students and teachers. A shift away from last-in, first-out layoffs this year should require that administrators document their rationale for each layoff decision so that senior teachers are not let go just because they have higher salaries or under some other pretense. And even if seniority were no longer the primary factor in determining layoffs, tenured teachers would still have due process protection if they felt they had been unfairly or arbitrarily dismissed. Fundamentally though, we cannot allow the possibility of abuse by a few administrators to stand in the way of moving toward a system that makes sense and puts the interests of students front and center.

What we're hearing: Every contract in the state has been negotiated in good faith by the local bargaining unit and the district, so state intervention should not be undertaken lightly.

⁹ "The Widget Effect." The New Teacher Project. 2009. <http://widgeteffect.org/downloads/TheWidgetEffect.pdf>

¹⁰ "Human Capital in Hartford Public Schools." National Council on Teacher Quality. http://www.nctq.org/p/publications/docs/nctq_hartford_human_capital.pdf

¹¹ Chris Moran. "Schools struggle with method to reduce teaching staffs." Sign On San Diego. April 27, 2009. <http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2009/apr/27/1m27decide23925-schools-struggle-method-reduce-tea/>

¹² "Hampton School Board owes voters explanation." Seacoastonline.com. April 17, 2009. <http://www.seacoastonline.com/articles/20090417-OPINION-904170373>

Budget-driven layoffs will disproportionately affect low-income students, many of whom attend school in districts under "corrective action" status. The State Board of Education already has the authority to intervene in these districts. Legislation to fix last-in, first-out layoffs should encourage local resolution of budget-driven layoffs, but in cases where there is not agreement on an alternative to seniority as the primary factor, the state has an overriding interest to minimize harm to students by intervening to keep the best teachers in the classroom. State lawmakers need to strengthen existing statute to empower the State Board to act now to require that other factors be taken into account in layoff decisions this year.

What we're hearing: It seems like all of this conversation about eliminating last-in, first-out layoffs is just a pretense for union busting.

Ending seniority-based layoffs is about recognizing that teachers are professionals who deserve to be treated as such, and whose on-the-job performance should be valued beyond a simple calculation of hours logged on the job. No one wants to create a teacher evaluation system or have performance-driven staffing for teachers without putting the teacher perspective up front. Utilizing known data about teacher contributions to student learning when considering budget-driven layoffs is a solution that absolutely requires input from teachers.¹³ Reform is about working collaboratively with teachers to keep the best in the classroom, and it can be done: New Haven Public Schools proved it,¹⁴ and so have a number of other districts and states around the country.

What we're hearing: State education funds won't be cut next year, so why are you saying there will be so many teacher layoffs?

Despite Governor Malloy's plans to hold state education funding flat, districts still have big budget holes to fill. The funding level is the same as it has been since 2009, but costs have gone up every year. To make matters worse, the special funds that many districts received directly from the federal government in recent years to plug budget holes are disappearing. The result? Big budget crunches and potentially unprecedented numbers of teacher layoffs. In 2010, Connecticut districts eliminated about 1,500 teaching positions statewide; that number could double this year.¹⁵

It's critical that we take action now to make sure those layoffs do the least possible harm to students. After all, the public education system is about educating students, not providing jobs for adults. Even in these tough times, we need to keep the focus on our goal of securing an excellent public education for every Connecticut child.

¹³ "Teacher Evaluation 2.0." The New Teacher Project. October 2010. <http://tntp.org/files/Teacher-Evaluation-Oct10F.pdf>

¹⁴ "School Change Initiative Documents." New Haven Public Schools. <http://www.nhps.net/scc/index>

¹⁵ Jacqueline Rabe. "Hundreds of teaching jobs still lost this year, despite federal cash infusion." CT Mirror. October 28, 2010. <http://www.ctmirror.org/story/8190/hundreds-teaching-jobs-still-lost-year-despite-federal-cash-infusion>